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FOR EUR/NB KATHERINE GARRY

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH ESTONIAN MINISTER OF
POPULATION

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: During a meeting September 12 with the Ambassador, Minister of Population and Ethnic Affairs Urve Palo reiterated the GOE's commitment to encouraging "stateless" residents to acquire citizenship. At the same time, however, Palo noted a lack of motivation among Russian speakers to learn Estonian. Palo described GOE plans to increase Russian language television programming in Estonia through establishment of another state-owned TV station. The Ambassador commended GOE integration efforts and reiterated the need for Estonia to counter more effectively anti-Estonian propaganda prevalent in many Russian Federation media sources. END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) On September 12, the Ambassador met with Minister of Population Urve Palo to discuss integration and citizenship issues. The Ambassador commended GOE efforts to promote integration and acquisition of citizenship for stateless people and expressed interest in the status of the approximately 115,000 people with "undetermined citizenship" currently residing in Estonia. Palo noted that about one-third of the stateless people in Estonia are under 20 years of age, one-third are between the ages of 20 and 45 and one-third are over the age of 45. She commented that she herself was surprised to learn that only 10% are 70 years or older.

¶3. Palo emphasized that all residents of Estonia, regardless of their citizenship status, enjoy many of the rights of Estonian citizens, including social security benefits and the ability to vote in local elections. In addition, Palo said, under a new European Union (EU) Directive, holders of long-term European residency permits can work in all other EU states. The only benefits of Estonian citizenship not enjoyed by stateless residents are the ability to vote in national elections and to work in the civil service or as police. As a result, many Russian speakers living in Estonia do not see a pressing need to acquire Estonian citizenship.

¶4. (U) Palo acknowledged that the requirement to learn Estonian in order to become a citizen is an obstacle for some Russian speakers. However, she added, many Russian speakers living in Estonia do learn other languages. For example, Palo has met many Russian speakers who have learned English or Finnish in order to compete for high paying jobs in Estonia and other EU countries.

¶5. (U) The Ambassador and Palo discussed the need for more Russian programming on Estonian TV to balance the anti-Estonian propaganda which is prevalent on most Russian Federation-based television stations. Palo said she is working with the Minister of Culture to launch a second state-owned TV channel (ETV2) in September 2008. The plan is for ETV2 to broadcast 2 to 3 hours of original Russian language programming during prime time hours. The rest of the time, Estonian-language programs will have Russian subtitles. Palo noted that initially some members of the Cabinet opposed this idea, but it now enjoys broad support in the Government.

16. (SBU) BIO NOTES: Prime Minister Ansip appointed Urve Palo to the position of Minister for Population and Ethnic Affairs in April 2007. As Minister, she is responsible for helping to integrate Estonia's minority population and developing the GOE's Integration Plan. Palo is a member of the Estonian Social Democratic Party and a newcomer to politics. Prior to serving in government, Palo spent the majority of her career in business as the director of Saint-Gonbain Eesti AS, a wholesale firm that markets insulation materials, acoustic suspended ceilings and plaster stone products in Estonia. Palo received a degree in Economics from Tartu University and a Master's Degree in international business administration from the Estonian Business School.

17. (SBU) Palo's relative inexperience has been in evidence on a few occasions when she has made statements that were inconsistent with GOE policy. In August, on the eve of the new school year (during which Russian high schools would begin teaching the first of several courses in Estonian), an Estonian media source cited Palo as saying that the GOE should explore proposals to give the Estonian citizenship exam in Russian. She quickly backed down, noting that it was "only an idea" and "worthy of discussion."

PHILLIPS